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SUBJECT: TAIWAN STUDENTS: US DOING TOO LITTLE

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On April 11, 2006, AIT hosted a group of 35 students to discuss cross-Strait issues in a Digital Video Conference (DVC) with Washington. In a 1-hour follow-on discussion, the students candidly expressed frustration with the USG's cross-Strait policy and the lack of support for Taiwan democracy.  
END SUMMARY

2. (U) In the latest of a series of meetings aimed at assessing student perspectives on U.S. cross-Strait policy, AIT hand-picked a panel of four undergraduate and graduate students majoring in Political Science and American Studies to discuss cross-Strait issues with Dr. Richard Bush. After the DVC concluded, students from the audience asked a number of insightful questions giving perspective on how they view their self-identity and U.S.-Taiwan cross-Strait policy.

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TAIWAN IDENTITY NOT YET FORGED  
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3. (SBU) The group had differing ideas of what Taiwan identity means. One 26-year old student stated, "while my family was originally from the Mainland, I am culturally Chinese, but politically Taiwanese." He has never visited the PRC, and his life is rooted in a democratic Taiwan. Some of the students said their generation had not yet formed a "true" Taiwan identity because they were born into a society still dominated by KMT pro-unification propaganda. Students were also particularly interested in the kind of sources China uses to assess the Taiwan perspective. One of the attending professors remarked that China's understanding of Taiwan is limited because they rely only on Mandarin (guoyu) source materials, and do not consult Taiwanese (taiyu) sources. He added that China cannot understand Taiwan unless they consult with those who actually understand the Taiwanese language.

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STATUS QUO POLICY IS NOT IN TAIWAN'S INTEREST  
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4. (SBU) Several students opined that the status quo policy is not in Taiwan's best interests. One panelist said "staying in place is the same as moving backwards for Taiwan." He criticized the U.S. for not paying attention to the rising tension in Taiwan society

over the PRC's military buildup. He stated, "If the U.S. does not actively mediate between China and Taiwan, then Taiwan will continue to lose ground militarily to the PRC." Responding to Dr. Bush's suggestion that Taiwan must build consensus before the U.S. can take a larger role, another student suggested that U.S. actions often influence Taiwan popular opinion, and that the U.S. could lead Taiwan toward consensus, instead of waiting for it. Moreover, as a democratic society Taiwan will always have debate, and will never achieve the kind of consensus that totalitarian China can.

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ARMS PROCUREMENTS NOT NEEDED  
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15. (SBU) During the discussion on arms sales, one student commented, "The weapons the U.S. would like to sell to Taiwan are outdated and will take so long to manufacture that they are not practical." He continued, "Taiwan will eventually lose any war with China, so it is a waste of time and energy for Taiwan to try to deter China through military means...A better solution would be for the U.S. to help Taiwan negotiate with the PRC to obtain a stable peace across the Strait."

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HONG KONG STYLE REUNIFICATION NOT FOR TAIWAN  
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16. (SBU) The students did not believe Hong Kong-style reunification would work for Taiwan. They contended that Taiwan's political and social culture are far removed from the PRC's. Students in Taiwan are accustomed to a level of free speech and active participation in their society that those in the PRC cannot understand or appreciate. If Taiwan were to reunify under a Hong Kong model, one student claimed, its citizens would have to give up the freedom that they

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had recently achieved.

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U.S. DOING TOO MUCH, AND NOT ENOUGH  
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17. (SBU) Several students complained the U.S. used its position to suppress the democratic rights of the Taiwanese people to make their own decisions, especially on the questions of constitutional reform and independence. According to these students, the U.S. also seemed to be meddling in Taiwan's domestic politics, by appearing to punish President Chen for "challenging" the status quo, and to reward KMT Chairman Ma Ying-jeou for "going along with it." The students also interpreted President Bush's recent statement that reunification should take place "with the consent of the people on both sides of the Strait" to mean that the U.S. (wrongly) affords China's totalitarian system the same moral status as Taiwan's democracy. One student asked, "If Taiwan decides democratically to do something against U.S. interests, (i.e. declare independence) will the U.S. still support us?"

18. (SBU) Several students wanted the U.S. to use its influence to create an atmosphere of negotiation and reconciliation as the USG has more leverage over China than does Taiwan. The students said that the U.S. could push the PRC government to meet with the Taiwan government. At the very least, one student commented, "The U.S. could act as a witness to any deal agreed to between two groups of Chinese people."

19. (SBU) COMMENT: This is not a scientific sampling of Taiwan youth opinions, but it does provide a useful unfiltered view of opinions we often hear expressed in far more indirect or diplomatic language. The students were not a homogeneous group. Some self-identified as Chinese, and more as Taiwanese, with the largest group self-identifying as both. They also differed on whether the U.S. should be more active in cross-Strait relations or less. However, there seemed to be consensus among the students present that the USG was not doing enough to promote and support Taiwan democracy. END

COMMENT

YOUNG